

RESEARCH REPORT

Media and Business Elites: Two Classes in Conflict?

STANLEY ROTHMAN & S. ROBERT LICHTER

FOR some time we have been engaged in a large-scale study of two "elite" groups in American life: business executives and journalists. Businessmen have played a leading role in American history, though today the significance of their role may be diminishing compared with that of elected officials, government bureaucrats, the intellectuals who shape ideas, and the journalists who spread them. In recent years we have seen more and more attention given to competition between what has been called the "new class," and the "old ruling class" of businessmen. The "new class" is variously defined, but usually refers to those whose base is in government, the universities, and the media. Thus a key question in American politics is whether the elites of government, the universities, and the media are really different in their ideas and outlooks from the business elite.

As part of our larger study of elites, we have been successful in interviewing 240 journalists at what are widely regarded as America's most influential media institutions: *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, *The Wall Street Journal*, *Time*, *Newsweek*, *U.S. News and World Report*, the three commercial television networks, and public television.¹ Within each organization we randomly selected individuals from news department executives, editorial or production staffs, and working reporters. We also interviewed top and middle level executives of firms drawn from various *Fortune* magazine lists of leading companies in various sectors of the economy. The interviews were conducted during 1979-1980, and the response rate among journalists was 76 percent, while among businessmen it reached 95 percent.

These interviews were compared in order to answer four ques-

¹ For evidence that these are our most influential media outlets, see Carol H. Weiss, "What America's Leaders Read," *Public Opinion Quarterly*, no. 38 (Spring 1974): 1-22.

tions: Do leading journalists differ significantly from business leaders in their political and social outlook? Are they skeptical of traditional American institutions and especially of business? Do the social backgrounds of elite journalists differ significantly from those of the business elite? And, most importantly, do journalists' social and political views affect the way in which they report the news?

WE found that the media elite does have a more liberal and cosmopolitan social outlook than either business leaders or the general public. On economic issues they are well to the left of businessmen.² Although most are not socialists, they strongly sympathize with the economic and social policies developed by the left wing of the Democratic Party during the 1960's and 1970's. They are also suspicious of and hostile toward business, are far more critical of American institutions than are businessmen, and are much more sympathetic to the "new morality" that developed in the 1960's.

For example, 45 percent of the media leaders strongly agree that the American legal system favors the wealthy, double the proportion of businessmen who think so. Conversely, media leaders are three times as likely as businessmen to reject the notion that American private enterprise is basically fair to workers. And 68 percent of the journalists, as against only 29 percent of the businessmen, believe that government should substantially reduce the income gap between the rich and the poor.

Differences on questions related to the "new morality" are even more striking. Businessmen support traditional moral standards by margins of three- and four-to-one over journalists. Only 15 percent of the journalists feel strongly that adultery is wrong, compared to 48 percent of the businessmen. Even fewer journalists, 9 percent, strongly agree that homosexual relations are wrong, compared to 37 percent of the businessmen.

These media and business leaders view each other with mutual suspicion, if not outright hostility. We asked all of them to rate the influence of various groups in our society and to express their preference for the power that each group should have. *Each group rates the other as the most influential group in America; moreover, each wants to reduce substantially the power of the other and to take its place as the most influential group.* Leading journalists see themselves as already quite influential, but they want relatively more power in American society than they now have—and certainly more than they perceive businessmen as having.

² For a fuller discussion of these findings see: S. Robert Lichter and Stanley Rothman, "Media and Business Elites," *Public Opinion* (October/November, 1981): 42 ff; and S. Robert Lichter and Stanley Rothman, "The Media and Business: A Question of Bias?" *Journal of Contemporary Studies* (in press); the first article is summarized in "Current Reading," *The Public Interest* no. 67 (Spring 1982): 140-142.

IN order to appraise the differences between these elites more systematically, we used the statistical technique called "factor analysis." The results showed that the social and political attitudes of the two groups form three separate ideological "clusters." The first cluster consists of attitudes favoring the "new morality (e.g., the belief that adultery is not immoral). The second grouping consists of "antisystem" or "alienated" responses, which involve the view that American society is unjust (e.g., the belief that the American legal system favors the wealthy). Finally, the third cluster involves positive attitudes on liberal economic reforms—those associated with the welfare state—such as income redistribution and guaranteed employment. We compared the scores of media and business leaders on each cluster of attitudes. The scores were "normalized" so that 50 represents an average score. As Table I shows, journalists outscore businessmen on all three scales by margins of seven to ten points. All of the differences are statistically significant.

We have also found that these attitudes differ within the media from institution to institution (Table II). Journalists at *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, and its sister publication *Newsweek* are well ahead of the other print media in all three measures. Television personnel are much more sympathetic to the "new morality" than are print journalists, and those in public television lead every other group in economic liberalism, alienation, and support for the "new morality."

These differences among media personnel are fairly substantial, and are statistically significant. On our "new morality" scale, for example, the television network personnel score about six points higher than those at *U.S. News and World Report*. On our economic liberalism scale, scores range from 50.7 for *Time* personnel to 58.1 for those at *The New York Times*, and almost 60 for those in public television. Even journalists at the most conservative publications are more liberal than the business elite.

CRITICS of the "new class" have argued that these differing attitudes are linked to divergent social backgrounds. If this is true, we should find that the media elite is drawn more heavily from urban, secular, highly educated, and affluent upper middle-class professional backgrounds. In general we have found that these asser-

TABLE I. *Scores of Media and Business Elites on New Morality, Alienation, and Economic Liberalism Scales*¹

	MEDIA ELITE	BUSINESS ELITE
New Morality	54.8	44.7
Alienation	53.6	46.6
Economic Liberalism	54.7	45.5

¹ Source: Authors' calculations. The scores are normalized, with 50 being an average score.

TABLE II. *Average Scores on New Morality, Alienation and Economic Liberalism at Ten National Media Outlets¹*

	NEW MORALITY	ALIENATION	ECONOMIC LIBERALISM
<i>U.S. News</i>	50.0	49.6	51.3
<i>Wall Street Journal</i>	52.3	51.6	51.7
<i>Time</i>	53.6	48.5	50.7
<i>Newsweek</i>	55.0	55.0	53.9
<i>Washington Post</i>	53.5	53.2	56.2
<i>N.Y. Times</i>	54.4	52.7	58.1
CBS	56.2	52.5	52.8
ABC	56.2	55.2	53.5
NBC	55.1	53.1	52.8
PBS	58.3	59.4	59.5

¹ Source: Authors' calculations. The scores are normalized, with 50 being an average score.

tions are accurate, although the differences are not always large. For instance, 36 percent of the journalists, as against 26 percent of the businessmen, grew up in large cities. The journalists also come from much more highly educated families than the businessmen: 25 percent of journalists' fathers held graduate degrees, twice the proportion among businessmen. And almost one in ten journalists report that their mothers held graduate degrees, compared to only 2 percent among businessmen.

Journalists' parents also tend to come from higher-status occupations. Among journalists' fathers, two in five were professionals and an equal number were businessmen; only 12 percent had fathers who were blue collar workers. Among businessmen, by contrast, only one in five came from professional homes, and the largest proportion, 28 percent, came from blue collar families. Not surprisingly, journalists are more likely than businessmen to say that when they were growing up their parents' income was "above average" (45 percent against 31 percent).

More surprisingly, business leaders are currently only slightly better off economically than the media elite. Only 57 percent of businessmen report family income of at least \$50,000 a year, as against 48 percent of media leaders. And 23 percent of the media elite report income of over \$75,000 a year, as against 25 percent of business leaders. At the very top of the scale, 3.4 percent of the journalists and only 2.1 percent of the businessmen report family income exceeding \$200,000 a year. As one might expect, television salaries bring overall media salaries up. A comparison of businessmen with print media personnel would have produced much greater differences. In addition, a larger number of media personnel than businessmen are either married to working professionals or rely upon inherited wealth. So differences in salary between journalists and businessmen are much larger than differences in family income. (And family income is a better measure of current economic status.)

There are equally interesting differences in education. While a slightly larger percentage of journalists than businessmen completed college (93 percent as against 87 percent), the proportions who have received graduate degrees are about the same (a little over one-third of both groups). However, the journalists are more likely to have attended prestigious schools. We ranked schools on a scale from 1 (lowest) to 7 (highest), based on such factors as size of endowment and student SAT scores. The average rating of undergraduate institutions attended by journalists was 5.56 as against 4.77 for businessmen. The differences between the graduate schools they attended is almost as large (6.34 as against 5.73). Both differences are statistically significant.

Finally, 13 percent of media personnel report that they were raised with no particular religious orientation, as against only two percent of businessmen. Today 50 percent of the journalists we studied regard themselves as agnostics or atheists, compared to only 12 percent of the businessmen. Only one out of seven media leaders attend church at least once a month, while a majority of the businessmen are regular churchgoers.

Do journalists' attitudes really account for the shape and substance of the news? Our interviews contained two tests which examine the way journalists make the "reality estimates" that underlie all news judgments. First, in an effort to understand the perspectives of businessmen and journalists on some aspects of the news, we handed members of both groups cards containing "news stories" we had written. Each story presented conflicting views on a controversial public issue. After returning the cards, subjects were asked to summarize the stories in a sentence or two. (Their summaries were coded by scorers who knew nothing about either the study's purposes or the identities of participants, and each summary was examined separately by two coders. The two scores were in agreement more than 90 percent of the time, suggesting that these classifications are very reliable.)

As it turns out, the interpretations of both journalists and businessmen are indeed related to the manner in which they perceive and describe the world. For example, one story dealt with affirmative action and the charge that it produces "reverse discrimination":

In the wake of the Bakke decision, a growing number of white males are fighting back against affirmative action programs that favor women and minorities in employment and university admissions. Steelworkers in Louisiana, firemen in Pittsburgh, and teachers in Detroit are all raising their voices in protest.

The chairman of the Equal Employment Opportunities Commission says that this backlash places affirmative action programs in "severe jeopardy." Conservative forces, he warns, are trying to exploit this reaction against "reverse discrimination" and throttle all efforts to bring women and racial minorities into the economic mainstream.

A white male teacher recently rejected for tenure in favor of a female colleague disputed this, saying, "It's all right to talk about eliminating discrimination, until your ox is gored. Then it brings the issue into focus."

Many people summarized this story in very straightforward or neutral terms: "[It's about] the effect of the Supreme Court's decision on the Bakke case." Others were careful to mention both sides in the conflict: "White males are increasingly resisting affirmative action programs, but the EEOC is defending the concept." About one person in four, however, remembered only one side of the story, and half these responses were sympathetic toward the cause of affirmative action: "Many feel that the Bakke decision will cause a reactionary approach to employment with minorities no longer being given favorable opportunities." Another summary read, "The decision in the Bakke case appears to be resulting in further discrimination of minorities." Other "one-sided" responses stressed the evils of "reverse discrimination": "A lot of people think there is reverse discrimination and affirmative action programs are discriminating" or, "What's good for the goose is good for the gander. The black minority wants equal rights but does not want [them] for the whites."

Overall, members of the media elite chose "positive" summaries over "negative" ones by a margin of 17 percent to 9 percent, almost a two-to-one ratio. By contrast, the business leaders favored the "negative" over the positive summaries by exactly the same margin. Businessmen were also more likely to frame their summaries in quite neutral terms, while journalists tended to portray a conflict between two sides. Differences emerged again when these groups summarized stories dealing with the income gap between blacks and whites, and with the conflict between environmental protection and energy development.

The implication of these findings is clear. Media and business elites interpret the same information quite differently, in ways that correspond to their very different views of the world. This may be especially troubling with regard to journalists, since they control the dissemination of news. It suggests that avoiding conscious bias is not enough, that one must still deal with unconscious bias.

INTERPRETING news stories is only one facet of the larger question of how elites interpret social reality. To examine this larger question systematically, we administered Thematic Apperception Tests (TATs), a series of ambiguous pictures about which respondents write stories, to both the media and business elites. We also devised a system to score the TATs for social and political imagery. For example, one TAT picture showed a black adult and child talking in a child's room. In the imaginative stories they created about the picture, journalists were over twice as likely as businessmen to mention discrimination encountered by blacks or the poverty that

they endure. Another picture showed a young man and an older man talking in an office. Most subjects identified both as businessmen, but some portrayed the characters as involved in illegal, unethical, or corrupt behavior in the pursuit of business interests. Others found a positive message, describing helpful behavior or the social benefits of business.

A typical "positive story" pictures the older man as trying to assist the younger:

Mr. Jones, son of the founder of the family company, is trying to persuade his own son that there are no new problems being faced by young Jones. Mr. Jones is explaining to his son his own learning experiences a generation before, and offering old-fashioned homilies about continuing to try in the face of difficulties. Young Jones . . . has faced his first major error with the company . . . His father is trying to explain that such errors are normal, if avoidable . . . Neither is comfortable doing what he is doing, yet each realizes that he is playing a useful role to each other . . .

A standard "negative" story, by contrast, focuses on greed and corruption in the boardroom:

The setting could be McDonnell-Douglas, the aircraft corporation, on the verge of deciding to go into production of the DC-10 transport. The older man has learned that the new design tests show a serious, systematic flaw that will almost certainly cause crashes. The younger man is weighing his own high ambition against the production decision on grounds of safety. The younger executive is deciding that the arguments of his associate are not sufficiently compelling to risk the loss of status and prospects of advancement. He is on the verge of selling out.

Business leaders produced slightly more positive stories about the picture than negative stories. Among the media elite, negative tales outnumbered positive ones by better than a four-to-one margin. Once again, differences were found for all five pictures.

To a much greater degree than businessmen, journalists wrote stories that criticized or lampooned "establishment" or authority figures and portrayed minority or low-status figures as victims of social oppression. In other words, political differences between media and business leaders are reflected in their interpretation of ambiguous social situations. This finding supports the argument that "new class" and traditional elites represent different cultural milieus or symbolic environments. Their divergent political outlooks are only one element of fundamental differences in the ways they perceive and interpret social reality.

A further question is whether the divergent political attitudes of journalists and their perceptions of society are systematically related to one another. For instance, consider a journalist who is economically liberal, and politically alienated. Do these traits make

him more likely to interpret an ambiguous TAT picture as a case of business corruption, or to react to a news story about the Bakke decision only in terms of its possible negative effects on minorities?

We first determined that our two measures of social perspective—the “news story” summaries and TAT social imagery—were themselves related. Someone who gave a liberal slant to the news stories also tended to write TAT stories that had liberal or anti-establishment themes, so we combined these tests into a single scale of “liberal” social perceptions. We found that 98 percent of the journalists produced at least one liberal response, and a majority attained scores of 3 or better. By contrast, fewer than three in ten businessmen gave as many as three liberal interpretations to the news stories and TAT pictures. Overall, the journalists produced a mean score of 2.8 liberal responses, which significantly exceeded the average of 1.7 among the businessmen. Moreover, these social perceptions were significantly correlated with the political attitudes we measured. All three sets of political attitudes—economic liberalism, alienation, and “new morality”—helped to explain social perceptions.

Our results suggest that journalists’ perceptions of social reality are influenced by their political attitudes, so it is not unreasonable to infer that their news judgments may reflect both the “progressive” values they hold and the “new sensibility” they represent. But we must urge some caution in interpreting these findings. The press has a longstanding tradition of fairness and nonpartisanship; the ability to overcome one’s biases is the hallmark of journalistic professionalism. Among the media leaders we surveyed, two out of three rejected the statement, “Journalists can’t be impartial in reporting on issues they feel strongly about.” On the other hand, one may strive for impartiality without always attaining it. As a former managing editor told us, “Even though these people are professionals, there’s bound to be some slippage. The real problem is, when they’re so politically homogenous, the slippage will be mostly in one direction.”

THE press upholds two conflicting ideals that cannot always be reconciled. The reformer’s social commitment coexists uneasily alongside the cool nonpartisanship of the objective observer. This is a dilemma that even the best journalists rarely face head-on. For example, Walter Cronkite was once asked whether journalists were “liberals,” biased against established institutions. He replied that this was not the case; they merely tended “to side with humanity rather than with authority.” This cuts to the heart of the issue. It is not a matter of conscious bias, but rather of the necessarily partial perspective through which social reality is filtered. If the world is divided into authority and humanity, then naturally one sides with humanity. But how the world is indeed divided, who is assigned to each side and the circumstances in which one takes a stand for one side and against the other—such judgments are anything

but self-evident. We all reconstruct reality for ourselves, but journalists are especially important because they help depict reality for the rest of society. They do so through the everyday decisions of their craft: What story is worth covering? How much play should it get? What "angle" should it be given? What sources are trustworthy and informative? The preconceptions journalists bring to such decisions help determine what images of society are available to their audience.

So the reason that the differences in political orientation between journalists and businessmen are important is that journalists are a new strategic elite, responsible for creating and transmitting the information that most Americans depend upon for their understanding of social reality. Whether or not they constitute a "new class," their distinctive mindset does influence the way they—and the rest of us—perceive social reality.